

Tyranny of the Watch
By
Daniel E. White March 11, 2024

I was walking on a downtown street with my friend. Our wives were scouring a street fair looking for good deals, and we were rejoining them after delivering something to our car. We had walked a reasonable distance.

Suddenly, my friend's watch beeped him. It had determined that my friend was exercising and asked if he wanted the watch to monitor his activity.

I chuckled and commented, seems like you won't be able to do much without the watch keeping track of you. We got a good laugh. Then a dark thought crossed my mind. Constant monitoring; isn't that a characteristic of the potential for tyranny? (See Cuba, North Korea, etc.)

Home from our day in the city, I thought more about the watch. The power of technology and the tyranny of time. When Chester Gould equipped Dick Tracy with a 2-way wrist radio in 1946, I suspect he thought that this figment of his imagination for his comic strip character might become reality one day. We don't know if his imagination included information retrieval, tracking and the many other features of a "smart" watch. Did Gould imagine entrepreneurs inventing needs and then filling them?

Steve Jobs was just one of the more famous people to approach his work with this mindset. He and the others in the development and advancement of cell phones guessed correctly that, once the phones were available at reasonable prices, everyone would want one. I am sure you have observed crowds, at restaurants, concerts, games, in which the odd person is the one without a cell phone in his or her hand.

But wait, there's more. Buy a smart watch and you don't need a pocket for a phone or to hold one in your hand. The entrepreneurs guessed right again. Who knew that we needed something on our wrist that could do much of what a cell phone could do?

In how many ways have we have ceded skills and actions to machines? The idea of a cell phone with a flashlight; that's a safety device. When did we decide that we needed instant access to more information than we can imagine? And then there are the added implications: constant attention to who is texting, what news is coming across the screen, playing games, checking mail while at the table with a friend. Are these threats to being in the moment with a live human being?

But I value heating, stoves, cars, easy access to information through Google, airplanes, A/C, photocopiers, cameras... The list of technological innovations that supply our lives with, theoretically, more time because it takes us less time to do routine things is almost without end. Industrial productivity is yet another area in which technology has had immeasurable impact. I play at being a Luddite, but I am not really one.

As long as I can unplug when I want to, I'm generally good with technology. But a watch that wants to tell me what to do and when to do it? And can reveal where I am? What next?

Even without the additional technology of my friend's watch, so much in life is measured by the clock. One of the allures of baseball as a team sport was the absence of any importance of the clock. That is until the powers that be thought that games were taking too long and needed a pitch clock. At least no game ends because time has run out.

Do we measure thinking time? How do we value time with family and friends? The rest of nature abides by nature's clock. Squirrels don't need a Rolex to know when it is time to collect acorns for the winter. Koola (Golden Plover) leave the warmer climes like Hawaii for summer nests in the far north on nearly the same day every April and make it back by August without a calendar reminder.

I joke about not wearing a watch for 40 years, saying that all a watch would be good for is to report the time. I have a decent sense of "time" intuitively, and I am never far from someone who is wearing a watch or a radio that tells me the time regularly every hour. So, in my mind, I haven't needed to worry about something on my wrist or on a chain in a watchpocket (that does not exist in clothes much anymore). Even as I write, in the upper right-hand corner of my desktop are digits telling me the time. I was never good at winding watches just the right amount anyway.

What would we do without time? Is that even possible, to be without time? Delineations of time are how humanity has organized Nature's periods of light and darkness. How could a community exist without agreements as to when to gather for work or meetings or what constitutes a fair amount of labor in a given cycle of light and darkness? What would we use to communicate how long it takes to cook something?

Time clocks. Time on the job. Time for breaks. Quality time with the kids. "Me" time. Can you imagine living without the idea of time? I can't.

Something in me, though, resists the tyranny of time, the notion that life has to be measured by a clock. The things that matter most to me are not measured by time.

Perhaps my not wearing a watch has become a daily reminder of that.

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